

DUTY *Brings Out* THE BEST

Airmen volunteers help Balad hospital thrive

Story and photos by
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A If you find yourself flat on your back being rolled into Balad Air Base's Air Force Theater Hospital, don't be surprised if the Airman drawing your blood is an F-16 crew chief.

If that makes you uneasy, there's likely to be a cook or an administrative specialist standing nearby to offer words of encouragement. Or how about a structural engineer to fluff your pillow?

During his day off from work, Tech. Sgt. Ronald Stokes assists medical technician Senior Airman Brynn Delano in the care of a patient at the Air Force Theater Hospital at Balad Air Base, Iraq. Normally busy on the flightline (right), the F-16 crew chief and Oklahoma Air National Guardsman has prior experience working in the medical field that makes him a valuable asset to the pool of base personnel who volunteer their time at the hospital.



Not to worry, the Balad hospital isn't outsourcing its medical staff. It's simply using volunteers, of which there seems to be no shortage. Although volunteers don't perform medical tasks they're not certified or licensed to do, their assistance is welcome nonetheless — and their contributions significant.

On any given month, more than 200 deployed men and women, mostly from the Air Force and Army, volunteer an average of 2,500 hours of free time to help the hospital staff and patients in any way possible.

"Our volunteers already have full-time jobs putting in a full day," said Maj. Danelle Roddy, the 332nd Expeditionary Medical Group Nutritional Medicine flight commander and hospital volunteer coordinator. "They're giving whatever time they can before they go home exhausted, or they come here and work during their off days."

Word of the volunteer program is spread via base introduction briefings, public information bulletins and word of mouth. People expressing an interest in volunteering are given an orientation briefing, then allowed to select a specific ward to work in.

"Not everyone is cut out to see some of the types of injuries we see, so each volunteer finds an area in the hospital that operates inside [his or her] comfort zone, and [he or she] contributes there," the major said.

Tech. Sgt. Ron Stokes, an F-16 crew chief deployed from the Oklahoma Air National Guard's 138th Fighter Wing in Tulsa, Okla., is no stranger to the emergency medical scene. When not on duty, he works as a rescue diver with the Oklahoma Disaster Response Task Force.

While most hospital patients arrive alive and conscious, Sergeant Stokes, who is a permanent fixture in the emergency room when not working a 24-on, 24-off shift, admits it presents new emotional challenges for him.



Senior Airman Jamie Hennessey applies tape to an IV drip line in the arm of a patient. During her normal duty hours, she is one of 22 air traffic controllers responsible for directing the movement of 17, 500 sorties in and out of Balad Air Base each month. Airman Hennessey is deployed from Moody Air Force Base, Ga.

“One minute you might be working with an American Soldier, the next minute a friendly Iraqi, and soon after that it may be a hostile insurgent. I really wasn’t expecting that,” he said, describing life in the level-3 trauma center that provides all patients, regardless of origin, the same quality of care. While using his left hand to squeeze a ventilator that breathes oxygen into an unconscious base contractor, the 16-year veteran finds his volunteer work satisfying.

“When I look back, I’ll be proud of what I did working in my primary [specialty], but I’ll look back with more emotion to the work I’m doing in the emergency room for these guys who’ve been dealing with snipers and suicide bombers,” he said. “If you think you’re having a bad day, come spend about 30 seconds over here and you’ll realize your day is not so bad.”

Major Roddy said most stateside military hospital volunteer staffs consist of retirees and military family members versus active duty, Guard or Reserve Airmen. Although retirees and family members have more available time to donate than deployed servicemembers, the ratio of volunteers per hospital bed at Balad, compared to U.S.-based hospitals, is considerably higher.

For example, the Mike O’Callaghan Federal Hospital at Nellis Air Force Base, Nev., where Major Roddy is normally assigned, is a 98-bed facility that employs an average of 60 volunteers — two-thirds of a volunteer per bed. The Balad hospital is a 58-bed facility that garners 200 volunteers monthly from the base population — that’s 3.44 volunteers per bed, the major said.

The hospital’s proximity to the war front, combined with sporadic mortar attacks and the continual “thump-thump-thump” of medevac helicopter blades as wounded are flown in from outside the wire, serve as a constant reminder of deployed life inside Iraq’s Sunni Triangle.

Senior Airman Jamie Hennessey, an air traffic controller at the base, makes it her business to watch inbound choppers — known locally as “hero” or “angel” missions — carrying the wounded across the Department of Defense’s single busiest runway. When she’s not volunteering at the hospital, she marshals some 17,500 sorties per month. The work not only keeps her

gainfully employed, but it reminds her of the sacrifices being made by fellow servicemembers.

“It makes your heart swell for these guys ... you don’t know who they are but you feel so sorry for them and they’re so brave at the same time,” said the Airman deployed from the 347th Operations Support Squadron at Moody AFB, Ga.

She still dreams of becoming a pediatrician some day and uses her bubbly personality to chat with patients. She also seeks out tedious, time-consuming tasks like filling syringes, which frees the staff to concentrate on more critical needs.

Nurse (Maj.) Stacy Greene sees tangible benefits of the volunteer program. “Sometimes you feel overwhelmed and think you’re having a hard time handling it all, until you see someone volunteer on his or her off time when they could be sleeping or relaxing,” she said. “It gives us more pride in what we do.”

Staff Sgt. Robert Bouick, a 332nd Expeditionary Logistics Readiness Squadron fuels specialist, knows he can’t do what many hospital patients were doing before getting injured. Nearly discharged twice because of back complications, he persuaded physicians to allow him to continue serving on active duty by vowing to deploy to a war zone. Keeping his promise, he soon received orders for the Kyrgyz Republic — then swapped assignments with a co-worker going to Iraq.

“My wife was [upset],” said the nine-year veteran from Fairchild AFB, Wash. “I figured that after spending a few years working as my unit’s deployment manager, sending all my co-workers to a hot zone like this, it was my turn to do it.”

Now deployed as a force protection escort, Sergeant Bouick works 12-hour shifts with 115 other Airmen to maintain “positive control” of nearly 400 host and foreign national contractors who work at Balad each day.

When asked about his volunteer time at the hospital, he said, “It’s not the blood and guts that bother me, it’s seeing our guys shot up, the emotional toll.”

Much like his decision to come to Iraq, the soft-spoken sergeant seemed driven by a sense of duty rather than by his emotions.

“Sacrificing my free time is nothing compared to the sacrifices made by the patients I provide comfort to,” he said. “Military service is about sacrifice. If you take out the sacrifice, it’s just a job. That’s what gives it its honor.”

A Humble Chief

With all the news about death and tragedy coming out of Iraq, the Balad hospital offers a different perspective on the war — one where stories of healing and compassion are happening every day. One such story has received a lot of attention.

Chief Master Sgt. John Gebhardt, superintendent of the 22nd Wing Medical Group at McConnell Air Force Base, Kan., recently gained worldwide attention for a photo of him holding an injured Iraqi child. The photo was taken while he was deployed to Balad Air Base, Iraq, working at the theater hospital.

The young infant had received extensive injuries to her head when insurgents attacked her family, killing both of her parents and many of her siblings. The chief had a knack for comforting her, and they would often catch a cat nap together in a chair.

Now, the chief is back at home in Wichita, Kan., with his wife, Mindy. They have a hospitable home five minutes away from McConnell. His son Ryan, 25, and daughter Amber, 23, have long since outgrown being cradled, but he said he thought about them constantly while he held the Iraqi child.

“I got as much enjoyment out of it as the baby did,” he said. “I reflected on my own family and life, and thought about how lucky I have been.”

His affection for children is no secret to Mindy. While dating John in high school, she watched how he bonded with the child of a coach on one of his athletic teams. That softer side of him is one of the reasons she married him.

“People see him as this tough guy,” she said. “But I always see that other side of him that is full of compassion.”

The chief, from Jordan, N.Y., is not at home in the spotlight. When asked to talk about himself, he tries to switch the focus to the other military members he served with at Balad.

While deployed to Iraq, he tried to help out any way he could. He figured holding a baby who needed comforting would free up one more set of arms that could be providing care to more critical patients.

The chief was not alone in volunteering at the hospital. There were hundreds of different volunteers, he said. Some of them volunteered so much that he mistakenly thought they were assigned there.

When Mindy describes the best qualities of her husband, the first word out of her mouth is integrity. She said the photo of her husband and the Iraqi child represents him accurately. She believes he has been so successful because he is such a straight-shooter, and he puts others’ welfare in front of his own.

But, the chief attributes his success to his family.

“Without their support I don’t know where I would be,” he said.

And it is the chief’s hope that families in Iraq will receive the same kind of support in the future — they are just like American families, he said.

“I pray for the best for the Iraqi children. I can’t tell the difference between their kids and our kids,” the chief said. “The Iraqi parents have the same care and compassion for their children as any American.”

Life is calmer for Chief Gebhardt now that he is back home, and even though his recent “fame” has highlighted an eventful 27-year career, he said he wouldn’t change a thing.

“If I had to do it over again, I would sign up and give it another ride,” he said.

— by Staff Sgt. Jeremy Larlee



Air Force photo

